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# Women in a box

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**Women in a box**

by

**Hua Pan**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:  
Barbara Walton, Major Professor  
April Eisman  
Stewart Austin  
Ellen Mckinney

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is the written component of the exhibition that was held from March 26 through April 9, 2015 in the gallery of 203 Design On Main, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. “Women in a Box,” the name of the thesis, explores the sexual imbalance and women’s to-be-looked-at-ness in patriarchal society, and concerns how mass media construct beauty standards and sexual attractiveness and the impacts on women’s identities. The artwork contains installations, pattern design, paintings, as well as video arts.

This writing component documents the inspiration and intention of the artist in creating the work. It also documents the process, and details the academic and the conceptual development of the project. A variety of philosophy and theories ranging from psychoanalytical to sociological have been cited and explained regarding their relevance to the project.

## CHAPTER 1

### ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Based on my personal background and experience in China, I had made the ideological history of Chinese culture the subject of my previous work. I told social, political, and cultural stories and discussed how they influenced ideology and people's way of living. From my experience as a woman and from growing an increasing awareness of gender issues, my artwork has tended to explore the value and identity of women in the world. Specifically, my thesis "Women in a Box," is a discussion on women's to-be-looked-at-ness and male gaze in patriarchal society, and concerns how mass media construct beauty standards and sexual attractiveness as well as those processes' impacts on women's lives.

The main theme in and subject of my work is the human body, especially the female body. Suzanne Lacy once said: *"Not only was the body a site, it was an important source of information. Much of women's social status was seen as based in the body, so issues like violence, birthing, sexuality and beauty were frequent subjects."* I have always been interested in the body, not only because it contains value, but also because of its presence as a sign of cultural ideals. A number of depictions of female bodies are contained in my artwork. In this thesis, I aim to discuss the value they embodied in patriarchal society.

Male gaze is another important theme I try to address in the works. When we were trying to perceive and interpret the world, the sense of sight can be an important weapon. The gaze, who gets looked at and how they get looked at, also known as controlling vision, is what I have tried to raise awareness about in my projects. Instead of having an inclination of having critical views on “gazing” or the “being gazed at,” in my work I hold a position of ambiguity. I try to discard my gender, my personal sense or views of this cultural phenomenon, and try to tell truth in the boldest and straightforward way.

Condoms, fashion magazines, mannequin heads, shipping boxes and QR codes---a machine-readable optical label that contains information about the item to which it is attached---are essential materials I choose; these objects’ self-explanatory relationships with mass media, the fashion industry, and consumer culture made them the subjects of my work.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **INFLUENCES**

Based on my academic experience and personal background, I was more interested in the body for its valuable qualities, issues of identity, and reflections of cultural ideals. As a female, the sexual imbalance between women and men and the objectification of women in a patriarchal society then became the theme I focused on.

Born in a small town in China and having lived there for the first 18 years of my life, I went to Beijing, the capital of China to begin my four-year college studies. In most of my living experience in those years, I saw how women's appearance influenced their lives.

For example, my mother used to be a very tall and thin woman with an attractive appearance. When she was around 20 years old, numbers of men would line up to date her. My father finally married my mother when she was 25. In the first several years of their marriage, they loved each other deeply. However, after I was born, their relationship began to take a different direction. For my dad, my mom was no longer attractive to him as she was before. He thought her skin had become flabby and turned more yellowish, wrinkles had grown across her face, and she became fatter than before. He began to lose patience with my mom, which made them quarrel with one another over daily trivial problems for many years. This kind of behavior is a pattern repeated in many relationships: marital, careers, particularly careers associated with movie and beauty

industries. Another example of how male gaze directing women's physical beauty and life is that in most companies in China, attractive women are more likely to get better positions during their job hunting process, also easy to get a promotion than those who are less attractive.

The existence and development of women's social beauty standards and sexual attractiveness are not unique to Chinese contemporary society. In ancient times and in other patriarchal cultures, we similarly find how male's preferences are directed at women's physical beauty.

In the Chinese Han Dynasty, influenced by Confucian theory, beauty standards for women were most related with gentle, demure, and refined demeanor, which resulted in women being educated to behave elegantly and properly. In the Chinese Song dynasty, women began to bind their feet at a young age to prevent growth to cater to men's obsession with lotus feet (tiny feet).

This binding feet custom originated among the upper class in China and was a symbol of beauty and status in the culture; women with tiny feet also had the ability to secure a more prestigious marriage. The practice had been documented as involving "pressing a girl's four toes toward the heel with cloth binders, hence bulging the foot into an arched shape, to wearing tight socks for a slender look" (Dorothy Ko, 1997). Around 6-8 years old, Chinese girls' four smaller toes would be bent to the feet and the feet were wrapped. In order to attract men, women allowed themselves to endure the physical discomfort of the transformation, which was extremely harmful and

miserable. Foot binding is an extremely painful and injurious process and accounted for 10% of death among young girls because they were not able to endure the procedure.



Feet binding <http://www.cvltnation.com/lotus-feet-foot-binding-photos/>

“A girl will doll herself up for him who loves her,” says an old saying in Chinese society. Women do their makeup, dress themselves in beautiful outfits; they were perceived as an image designed to flatter males—the “ideal” spectators. Some elderly Chinese women still alive today live with disabilities related to their childhood foot binding; my grandmother, a traditional Chinese woman who is now 80 years old, is one of these women. The first time I saw her feet, I was shocked. She was one of the last generations of Chinese women who were required to have these “lotus feet.” For women, lotus feet are symbols of social class and elegance; for men, it is closely associated with a higher order of sex and love. Though the binding tradition was abandoned soon after, when my grandmother was still young, her feet were severely deformed. Binding feet is one of the many examples of the negative effects on women’s



to-be-looked-at-ness. High heels in western society is another example of negative repercussions brought about by women wanting to be the subject of men's gazing as well"

Those "perfect" pumps also create permanent health problems for women. According to Natalie A. Nevins, DO, an osteopathic physician from Hollywood, California, "Extended wear of high heels and continually bending your toes into an unnatural position can cause a range of ailments, from ingrown toenails to irreversible damage to leg tendons." Wearing high heels can shorten the muscles in one's calves and in one's back, leading to pain and muscle spasms. But high heels always take a large place in fashion markets to the extent that a women's wardrobe cannot be complete without high heels; this further adds to the glamour, nobility, and sexuality women's natural beauty embodies.



High heel damage

(Retrieved from: YouTube screenshot :RNOH uses 3D scanner to revolutionize treatment of foot problems)

In the classic paintings of the 15th century, we can see female nudes figures, but seldom see male nudes. “Men act and women appear” has always been the situation since the 15th century. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at to gain their value/power through this process. There is some pleasure in being gazed upon, they tend to/like to show their bodies and men like to watch them, so the pleasure is gained by themselves watching as if they were men.

What are the prolific images we observe when we turn on the TV or open magazines? Confronted with these questions, probably the majority of people would answer: “The beauty & youth of a lady” or “women with beautiful bodies.” If we question more closely “What are the main features of those women/these bodies?” most frequently the answers are striking similar; “They are sexy/white/thin/fit...” Those female images displayed in magazines and television are considered the “ideal body, and are set as the beauty and sexual standards for our society. As a result, most women in society face heavy pressure to attain those standards.

However, from what are those so-called social “beauty standards” or “sexual attractiveness” constructed? For whom are those women’s images made? The answers are obvious and all can be ascribed to the patriarchal society, which consists of a male-dominated power structure throughout the organized society and in individual relationships. In patriarchal society, the relationship between the female and the male has involved being gazed at and watching. The

culture of the patriarchal society decides the beauty standards and sexual attractiveness.

More than men, women are fed the notion that their worth is strongly tied to their ability to be sexually attractive and available. This is not the same for women exploring and valuing their own sexual selves — it is more about being passively desired. (Jarune Uwujaren, 2015)

In Mulvey's famous essay, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," she argues that modern film is created assuming a heterosexual male observer (Mulvey, 1975). The author writes:

"In a world ordered by sexual unbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy unto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be seen to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."

Nowadays, we see "ideal" bodies dominating motion pictures, magazines, billboards, advertisements, and other mass media outlets of our culture; meanwhile those "imperfect" bodies are denigrated and characterized as undesirable. This is especially true for women, because in most cultures "young," "thin," "fit," "white" and "voluptuous" are among those parameters and descriptors used to define a woman's body. In order to conform to those ideals, women face psychological and physical stress in making decisions regarding their eating habits, restrictive clothing, plastic surgeries, and conforming to what is desirable to the male gaze.

## CHAPTER 3

### ARTWORKS

Based on the theoretical perspectives and my own personal experience, I wanted to create a series of works showing the relationship between women's to-be-looked-at-ness, objectification, and the male gaze in patriarchal society. Plastic surgery, eating disorders, ultra thinness, and excessive consumption are among the main subjects I want to discuss in my works.

Sight is the most common way we use to perceive the world, and the way we see things is affected by our beliefs and knowledge. Cultural ideals create social standards for beauty and sexual attractiveness and those who are in power in the culture have control over those who have less power by directing their way of seeing the world. In this sense, those people with less power often try to conform to norms and standards to prevent being undervalued by members of their culture. In a patriarchal society, power is held mostly by men and is always represented by the idea that "men act and women appear"(John Berger, 1972). Male gaze, the process of having control over visual representation, has dominated patriarchal society's cultures and has important influence on women's lives and social status. In other words, male gaze directs and dominates the way women--who hold less power in a patriarchal society—act and appear.

With the invention and increasing development of communication technologies, mass media has become a dominant way of controlling visual representation. Television, fashion magazines,

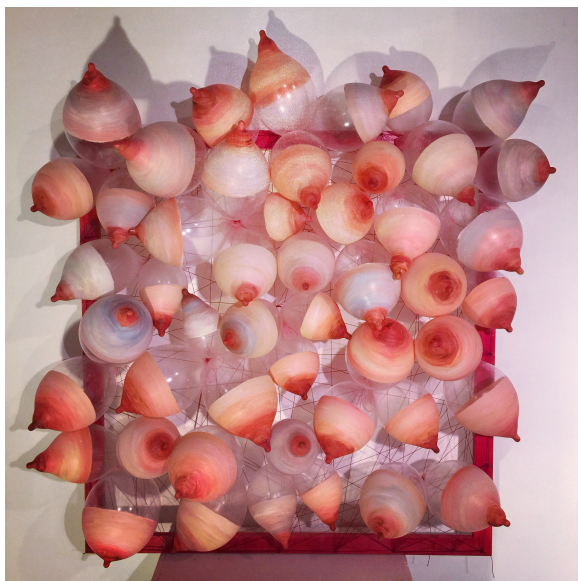
advertisements, billboards, and other primary media forms provide the society a standard to which women are expected to strive. Chosen messages, information, and images together construct and shape social ideologies and perceptions of ideal beauty. In order to raise the awareness of how the structures and attitudes have influenced the beauty ideals and social practices in a patriarchal society, my artworks began to address more women's issues and I spent a large amount of time exploring materials. Condoms, fashion magazines, customized tapes, steel hangers, shipping boxes, mannequins, and QR codes that have strong connections with the mass media, fashion industry, and consumers are incorporated into my work.

By providing messages, information, products, and ideal images that are expected to help women become thinner, look better, and be sexier, mainstream media, such as magazines and advertisements, market to help women "better themselves." Also, by creating certain types of messages and information, media can manipulate people's attitudes and opinions, directing society's perceptions of particular groups. In a patriarchal society, mass media often use gender stereotypes in which men have been perceived as heads of a family and women were housewives; in these scenarios, men have been considered independent and the financial supporters, while women are generally considered as the ones responsible for taking care of the home and nurturing the family. Though the gaps between gender roles have become smaller nowadays, the traditional gender stereotypes still perpetuate in different ways in our lives.

## 1. Better Yourself:

Suzanne Lacy once said: “Not only was the body a site, it was an important source of information. Much of women’s social status was seen as based in the body, so issues like violence, birthing, sexuality and beauty were frequent subjects” (Suzanne Lacy, 1996).

One’s eating habits, social status, moods, and physical situations are shown in our bodies. By looking at one’s body, we can easily know if he or she is young or old, black or white, slim or fat, male or female, or whether the person enjoys exercising or has some physical problems; for these reasons, I choose the body as one of my subjects for my artwork.



(Figure 1) “Better Yourself”, condoms and acrylic paint

My work entitled “Better Yourself” (Figure 1) is inspired from the objectification of women and gender stereotypes in mass media in patriarchal society. This artwork is made from 200 “boobs” which were created with pink condoms. I choose the “breast” as the subject for this artwork, because I consider the body part as a symbol, a way of identifying a person as “male” or

“female,” “old” or “young”, “flabby” or “voluptuous;” it is also the most common way for us to identify people in our daily lives. I hope the moment when the audience sees this work, they can be brought into a conversation with women immediately. I believe that each body has its

own value, a value which is constructed by cultural and social standards, and information contained in the representation of bodies has also been deeply influenced by mass media.

Because the breast is an important body part for women, and is often fetishized by males, this body part became the best choice to represent women's to-be-looked-at-ness and male gaze. Condoms have been chosen to make breasts in the artwork, because I considered them as a symbol and metaphor of sex, in most cases, the relationship between men and women.

At the beginning, it was a frustrating process for creating those "boobs" with condoms, because I tried to use oil paints to make them more realistic. However, the oil paints were not stable enough to last a long time on condoms. The oil paint broke the condom material down too quickly. Then I tried using gesso and acrylic paints, which fortunately worked. For the project, I blew up 200-300 condoms and tied them with threads, after applying gesso onto them and paint each of them realistically. (Figure 2)



Figure 2 Better Yourself

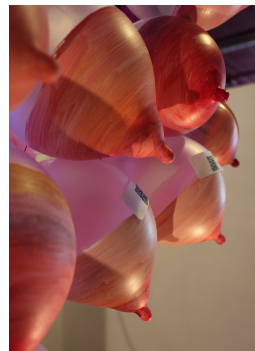


Figure 3 Better Yourself

On most of the breasts were attached with QR codes I generated (Figure 3). QR codes use standardized encoding modes to efficiently store data that they have great storage capacity and I considered them the best way to transfer my message to the viewers; each of the codes has its own stereotypes of women or “ideal” body information, which are also pervasive in mass media, and shows how society “gazes” at female bodies. I encourage the audience to use their smart phones to scan each breast, so they can read the texts immediately. Also, because the process of scanning is a process of gazing, women are being looked at again.

The stereotypes included in the QR codes displayed text such as the following

“She becomes her mother again”;

“She is a nurse, not a doctor;”

“She is supposed to make less money than men”;

“The best women are stay-at-home moms”;

“She is not as strong as he”...

## **2. Haute Couture**

Social standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness have been formed in different cultures throughout history. Every culture constructs images of attractiveness through forming certain ideal body types, and the value in those bodies is transmitted by messages in different ways to the world, eventually forming general social views of a body’s value. Greek figurative art showed a young, healthy body with desirable proportions. In 16th and 17th Europe, ample bodies



were the obsession of the society and served as indications of one's social status and wealth. Contemporary Americans are more attracted to those slim female bodies and well-toned male bodies. However, women who identify with being Black perceive bigger, thicker, and more voluptuous figures to be more attractive (Craig, 2006; de Casanova, 2004). Also, Black Americans are less likely to endorse the thin ideal compared to White Americans (Gluck & Geliebter, 2002). Asians, on the other hand, are obsessed with extreme thinness in their body ideals, even more so than White Americans (Evans & McConnell, 2003). Nowadays, concern over weight and eating disorders perpetuates women's lives. Ultra-thin ideals are so prominent and dominate most mass media in our daily lives.



Figure 4 Haute Couture



Figure 4 (Continued)



Figure 5 Haute Couture Fashion Illustrations



Figure 5 (Continued)

My artwork “Haute Couture” consists of six huge dresses made by ripped fashion magazines and customized tapes (Figure 4). Also each of the dresses is accompanied with its fashion illustration (Figure 5). “Haute Couture” is a French term meaning “high sewing/dressmaking/fashion,” and it refers to the high quality, expensive, and unusual fabric clothing created mostly by hand and with elaborate details. Most haute coutures are created for exclusive purposes and often are the trend-setting fashion for women. In the fashion shows of Paris, New York, and Italy, and in most fashion magazines or on the red carpet, we can see haute couture. It usually takes from 100-400 hours to make a dress and each can cost tens of thousands of dollars; not surprisingly, these pieces are owned by only a small group of people in the world, such as celebrities or top models. Each of my “Haute Couture” dresses is at least 6.5 feet tall, suggesting abnormally long and skinny waistlines.



This work was originally inspired by artist Maureen Connor's artwork, *Thinner than you* (Figure 6), which criticized the narrow standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness. For Connor, the



Figure 6  
Thinner than you,  
Maureen Connor

tightly stretched dress shows the pressure that women faced and the empty dress shows the concept of “empty vessel,” the drained essence of the illusion of a soul in women's bodies.

The stereotype of thinness as a symbol of success has had an immense impact on women's lives, and the fashion industry is a place where most models embody the “ideal thin body.” In this work, my dresses are made of the most popular fashion magazines such as “Vogue”, “W”, “Bazaar”, “Elle”, and “Self”. All of these magazines

are a main part of mass media and play an important role in constructing stereotypes and beauty standards for the society.

Besides fashion magazines, another important material in this project is a customized tape. The tape is logoed with the label “The Second Sex & Co,” which was inspired by the book “The Second Sex” by Simone de Beauvoir. According to Beauvoir, man considers himself as the essential being or the subject and fundamentally oppresses women by characterizing them as “the other.” Men as the subject are essential, yet women as “the other” (the object) are secondary. I put the logo on the tape and attached them on the body of the boxes, symbolizing that all the contents in the boxes are shipped from the “Second Sex & Company.” I believed that “The

Second Sex & Co.” cannot only represent consumerism, but also addresses the women’s otherness and objectification in a patriarchal society.

In order to make those “Haute Couture” dresses, I tore up the fashion magazines and used the tape to reconstruct them. I consider the process of tearing up the magazines as a process whereby I dismembered the obsessions in fashion and consumption, and also a process where I broke down the dominant mass media’s role as being as a major contributor to transferring psychological and physical stress on women by creating “ideal” body standards. At the same time, by this reconstructing and rebuilding the magazines with tape, I intend to present the facts that today’s women are striving for extreme thinness. Many parts of the dresses are extremely flat and skinny, showing the emptiness and soullessness in most of today’s bodies.

### 3. She...is Beautiful



Figure 7 “She... is Beautiful”, mannequins, acrylic paints, fashion magazines, and syringes

Feminine beauty standards are presented in all media forms in society. The importance of physical appearance has also been reinforced in most women’s lives. Yet “ideal” does not mean “real”; each image we see in magazines is painstakingly worked over and altered. All the models

or celebrities are manipulated; their white teeth have been bleached, and their wrinkles and blemishes are totally “photoshopped” away. The “ideal beauty” is, thus, almost unattainable for the majority of women. In order to pursue the “ideal” physical appearance, excessive plastic surgeries occupied women’s minds as they strive to achieve a better look.

She... is Beautiful is a set of three mannequins, which are commonly displayed in stores as a carrier of fashion goods such as sunglasses, hats and scarves. Half of the mannequin’s head is covered by ragged fashion magazines; the other half is carefully painted with acrylic. Each of the mannequins is set in a painted butcher tray, which is a common object one can find in hospitals of China. All the materials in the project have close relationship with women’s pursuit of beauty and with plastic surgery. I hope to create a direct scene for the audience, showing the heavy pressures women are facing today.

The title is “She...is Beautiful” is a complex naming of the artwork. The word “She” in English refers to women, but in Chinese, it has the same pronunciation and meaning as “ejaculation.” Therefore, audiences with different cultural backgrounds would have different experiences.

#### **4. Women in a Box**

Linda Nead writes in her *Female Nude*:

*Woman looks at herself in the mirror, her identity is framed by the abundance of*

*images that define femininity. She is framed --experiences herself as image or representation-- by the edges of the mirror and then judges the boundaries of her own form and carries out any necessary self-regulation.... The formless matter of the female body has to be contained within boundaries, conventions and poses.*

According to Nead, women as identities are formed by the prevalence of images of the female body and by how the society defines them. Also, according to the theories on male gaze, from John Berger, Foucault, looking is not neutral or objective. Gender, class, race, age, and nationality differences made the viewers have different ways of looking and thinking. Women need to continually watch themselves, as their sense of themselves and their value is more dependent on their being appreciated by men. Most of the time, men act and women appear. Men watch women; women watch themselves being looked at.

Based on this notion, I also wanted to explore a way to show the relationship between the male gaze and women's to-be-looked-at-ness. My work "Women in a Box" series originated from this idea. Most of these artworks are set in shipping boxes. I consider the shipping box as symbols of consumerism. Each box contains different objects commonly associated with females, including breasts, high heels, and bow shoes, all of which have connection or being representations of men's gaze on a female body. Finally, each box is randomly wrapped with "The Second Sex & Co." tape, which further objectifies the female subjects in the box and presents women's otherness. When the audience stands in front of the box, they may gain an experience of gazing and, at the same time, the female subjects are being gazed at.



Figure 8 Women in a Box 1, bow shoe, pattern design

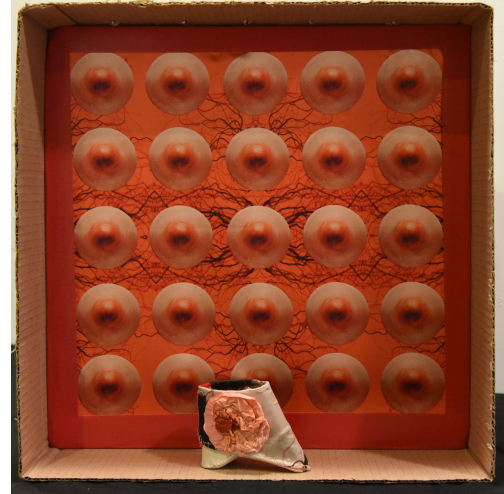


Figure 9 Women in a Box 2, bow shoe, pattern design



Figure 10 Women in a Box 3, high heel, condoms, tapes, Shipping box



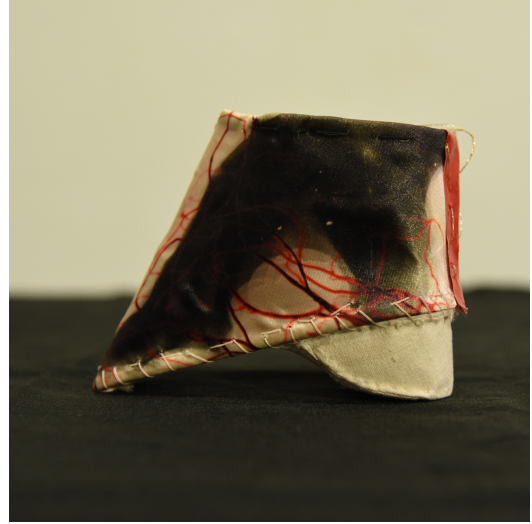
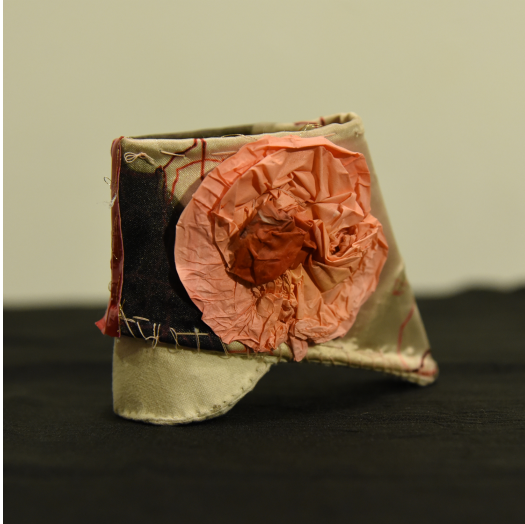


Figure 11 Bow shoe, pattern design

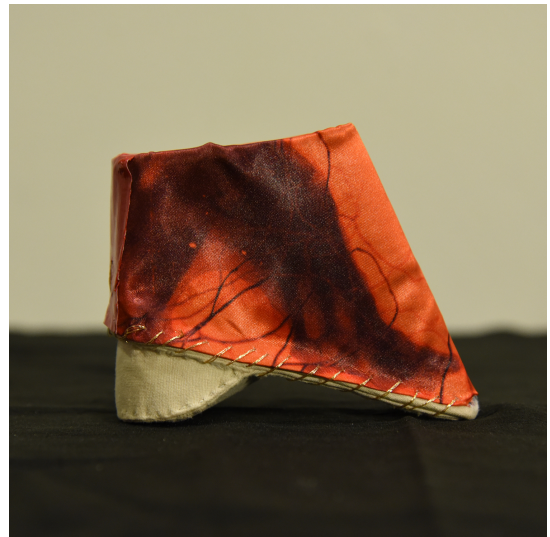
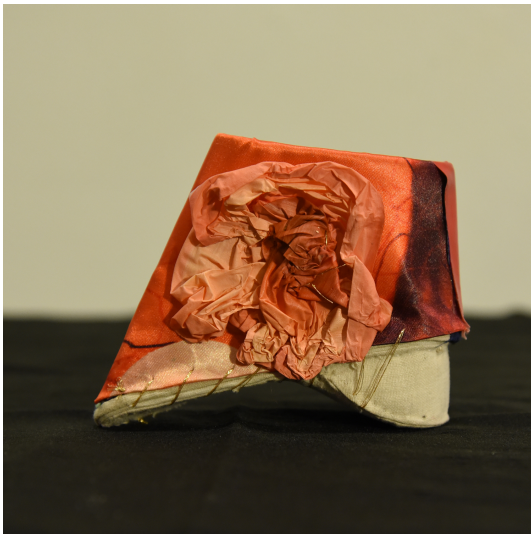


Figure 11 Continued



Figure 11, black high heel (Retrieved from:  
[http://www.debshops.cc/patent-pointed-toe-pump-high-heel-black-shoes-custom-made-\\_392.html](http://www.debshops.cc/patent-pointed-toe-pump-high-heel-black-shoes-custom-made-_392.html))

This set of artwork in this project was directly inspired by Chinese foot binding and western high heels, both of which are closely connected with women's to-be-looked-at-ness and the male gaze. In order to cater to male's preferences, women pay the high price of health problems to achieve a more attractive appearance.

In this set of work entitled "Women in a Box", the materials I used to create these works are fashion magazines, condoms, shipping boxes, Chinese bow shoes, and high heels. The subject of the first and second boxes (Figure 8&9) is related to the Chinese foot-binding tradition, from which I hoped to incorporate more conventional and Chinese elements. In this project, I focused more on pattern design. The patterns were designed for the Chinese bow shoes with a major theme in the pattern as women's breasts; by repeating those images, I hope to create a powerful scene to the audience that directly exposes women's body parts to the viewers. In terms of the

fabric, I decided to use satin, which is a common fabric in the 20th century among the Chinese upper class. The textiles were finally set in the shipping boxes along with the bow shoes, which are stitched with the fabric.

In the third box (Figure 10), I blew up condoms and stuffed them into the shipping box, and then sealed with my customized tape. The condom is a contemporary product; its relationship with contemporary life and its resemblance to breasts after being inflated, together with the stitched four-inch-heel, can bring the audience into a conversation about the objectification of women in our contemporary world.

By putting these three boxes together, I hope to give the audience an experience of how women's to-be-looked-at-ness is influenced in patriarchal society in both Chinese and western culture.



Figure 12 Woman in a Box 4, Oil painting in shipping box



Figure 13 Woman in a Box 5, oil painting in shipping box



Figure 14, Judy Chicago, Dinner Party

Judy Chicago is an important artist to me. As an important icon of 1970s feminist art, her artwork *Dinner Party* (Figure 14) gives me much inspirations for the subjects I choose in my creation process. Chicago's art incorporated a triangular party table with plates designed to show imagery of a vulva. Embroidered runners, gold chalices and utensils, and butterfly forms are part of Chicago's installation as well. I believe the iconography Chicago used to discuss women's issues among society was powerful. Her "cunt imagery" and the direct use of vulva designs inspired my works such as "Woman in a Box 4 & 5" (Figure 12 & 13), "Blossom", (Figure 15)



and “Untitled”. (Figure 16) The main subjects in these boxes paintings are woman’s lips and breasts, both of which are amplified with strong visual power, to represent women being gazed at.

Another subject important in this painting is a flower; flower is an object with which I am personally quite fascinated. Also, I consider a flower a symbolization for women; some flowers resemble the vulva of a woman, and both subjects are full of vitality. With the blossom as the state of flowering and flourishing in a moment of ephemeral beauty and vitality, I hope the flower can serve as a representation of women, a metaphor of women’s lives and their beauty.

The body parts of women are directly amplified and expressed to the audience in my artwork. The parts are surrounded or accompanied by flowers. The majority of the colors I choose for the flowers are blue, pink, red, and white, all colors that work with the subject to give the audience an experience of exploring the women’s life.



Figure 15, Blossom, oil on canvas



Figure 16, Untitled, oil on canvas

Barbara Kruger's works also inspired my "What Do You Think She Looks Like" piece (Figure 17). Kruger's use of written words, through massive text laid on images on billboards and installations, together provides a challenging experience to the viewer. Feminism, consumerism, identity, power, and sexuality are main themes Kruger explored in her art. The way of incorporating images with texts is powerful and shocking in its direct transmission of messages to the viewers, and its ability to raise direct questions and assentation in conversations between the viewers and the artwork as well. In my piece "What do you think she looks like," I put the text-incorporated oil painting in the shipping box with the intention of creating a moment of gazing at the objects, and at the same time, show how the female in the box is being watched and explored.



Figure 17, What Do You Think She Looks Like, oil on canvas in shipping box

## 5. Video art installation, Women in a Box

Film is good example of a mass media outlet designed for men's gaze and women's to-be-looked-at-ness. Laura Mulvey's described the "male gaze," and argues that mainstream film reflects the patriarchal society which is structured and dominated by the male gaze (desire), by using large amount of female figures. Hollywood narrative films tend to provide male audiences with a visual pleasure experience (scopophilia and narcissism). At the same time, women are displayed as sexual objects; they are embodied with a traditional exhibitionist role. Women are coded with a "to-be-looked-at-ness."

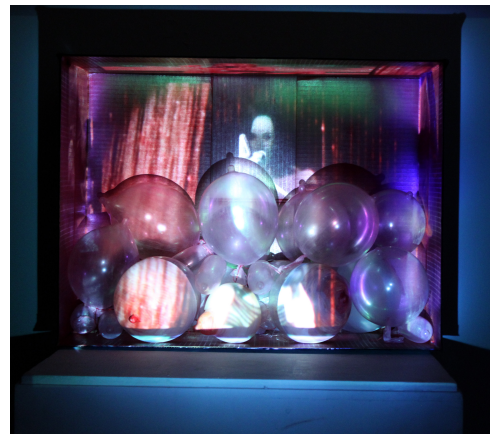
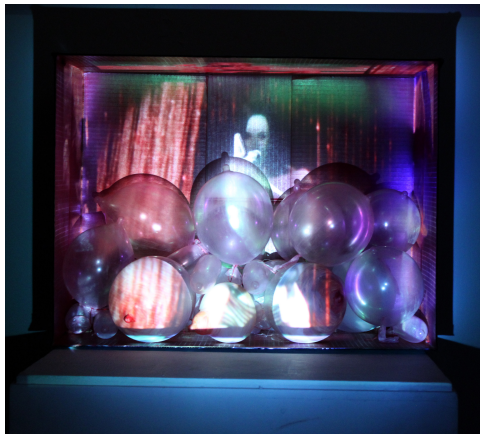


Figure 18, Women in a box, video art installation, 4 min

My short video art installation is made from 30 video clips extracted from fashion advertising, famous movie clips, runway shows, including Malèna, The Seven Year Itch, Transformer, Victoria Secret commercials, and 007, to name a few. In all those clips, women's body and men's watching of the bodies are juxtaposed, representing both how women's to-be-looked-at-ness and male gaze are shown in mainstream media.

The site-specific video installation is projected directly into a shipping box, which contains a lot of condom-made-breasts. For me, those breasts are representations of women and the shipping box refers to the patriarchal society. Most of the “breasts” are not painted, and are more representative of bubbles, which are fragile, showing how heavy women’s stress is.

The video installation was set in a private dark room, which allows only one person at a time to enter in and watch the video, creating a space for the audience to gaze, reinforcing women’s to-be-looked-at-ness again.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONCLUSION**

The work included in this exhibition reflects the accumulation of my learning experience in my graduate life. They reveal my individual creative and explorative process

I enjoy the process of making artwork because I like expressing one's ideas through visual objects. My artistic explorations began in asking myself "What shall I make? What are my concerns about living in our global society? What do I have to say? How shall I make?" "What" was the hardest and most critical part for me. I always want to explore new ideas/concerns and find more possibilities for expanding my art, so after deciding "what" to make, all that was left was addressing "How" to make it, and thus use the requirements of technique and materials to realize the "What."

Over the course of my studies and artistic practice, I've developed my own way of combining academic analysis and intuition into the process of creating artworks. Reading continues to influence my work. It provides me with inspiration and ways of seeing and thinking in the world, which broadens my process of concept exploring and problem solving; Also, I kept on learning new techniques that can help me express my inspiration or intuition through my artworks.

This exhibition serves as an important turning point in my artistic life. I've not only gained the ability to find the courage to explore new concepts and ways of creating, but also found my interests in exploring women's issues in patriarchal society. Now it becomes the most interesting

aspects of “What” in my projects and I believe I will continue to explore this theme deeply in my future works. I wish to discard my gender role as being a woman, but with a neutral sense, to look at the issue without bias. In terms of “How” to accomplish the work, painting will still occupy a major place in my works; also, installation work is what I am most interested in now, so I hope to explore additional ways to incorporate my paintings with my installations. The materials I choose, the way I incorporate them and reconstruct ready-made pieces, the way I set up installations in galleries and the visual experience it could provide the audience, are all the focus I intend to explore in my future creations.

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